

Reopening of New York Could Begin Upstate After May 15, Cuomo Says

The governor outlined a plan to restart the economy, beginning with manufacturing and construction, and suggested professional sports could resume without fans.



By Jesse McKinley

April 26, 2020

ALBANY, N.Y. — With promising indications that the coronavirus contagion has passed its peak, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York laid out a broad outline on Sunday for a gradual restart of the state that would allow some “low-risk” businesses upstate to reopen as soon as mid-May.

The governor’s announcement, coming as the state recorded its lowest death daily toll in nearly a month, was filled with caveats, but nonetheless offered the clearest outline yet for recovery in New York, the national center of the outbreak, with nearly 17,000 dead.

That human devastation has largely been confined thus far to New York City and its sprawling suburbs. And under Mr. Cuomo’s plan, upstate regions would move forward with reopening long before downstate, with an emphasis on manufacturing and construction, industries in which telecommuting and working from home are impossible.

During his daily briefing in the State Capitol in Albany, Mr. Cuomo said such changes could occur shortly after May 15, when a statewide stay-at-home order — known as New York State On Pause — is scheduled to lapse, though the governor has indicated that many restrictions on businesses and residents’ activities could be continued for weeks, if not months.

He did not suggest any loosening of restrictions on New York City in the near future.

Still, the governor’s remarks offered a hint of a return to normalcy for some state residents, following weeks of heartbreaking news and amid a still-cascading economic disaster.

“The numbers are on the decline: Everything we have done is working,” Mr. Cuomo said, adding that while caution was still needed, “There’s no doubt that we’ve gone at this point through the worst. And as long as we act prudently going forward, the worst should be over.”

The governor’s cautious embrace of a phased reopening comes even as other states — largely led by Republican governors — have been more aggressive about such plans.

In Georgia, close-contact retail businesses like barbers and tattoo parlors were allowed to open on Friday. Areas where large numbers of people congregate, such as movie theaters, were expected to accept customers on Monday, though mayors of large cities like Atlanta and Augusta have resisted Gov.

Brian Kemp's call for reopening.

Mr. Cuomo, a third-term Democrat, said that he was closely monitoring hospitalization, infection and recovery rates in the city and regionally, with an eye toward the federal guidelines released by the White House 10 days ago. Under those, states were advised that they could move into limited reopening if they satisfied a series of criteria, including two weeks of sustained downward trends in documented cases of Covid-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus, and an easing of stress on the hospital system.

On Sunday evening, Gov. Philip D. Murphy of New Jersey said that he too would begin to lay out a vision for reopening his state, which has also lost thousands of lives to the coronavirus. “The road back will be driven by data, science and common sense,” Mr. Murphy said in a tweet.

In New York, the daily count of new cases statewide has generally been trending downward, though the numbers have sometimes varied significantly from day to day and they rose toward the end of last week. Another metric laid out by the White House is the percentage of tests that are positive; by that metric, New York has been on a downward trajectory.

In his remarks, Mr. Cuomo made clear that the road to reopening was cratered with potential hazards, specifically saying there should be no events or attractions that would draw people from more infected regions to less infected areas, such as Central New York or the Adirondacks, two areas he suggested were places where restrictions could soon be eased.

“It’s possible that you open something in Syracuse or you open something in the North Country, where you now see license plates coming in from Connecticut, New Jersey, people from downstate, all coming to that area, because they’ve been locked down and they’re looking for an activity,” he said. “So that’s something that we have to pay attention to.”

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At the same time, Mr. Cuomo pleaded with local officials — particularly in the New York City region — to consider how to provide for summer activities for residents, including children. New York’s mayor, Bill de Blasio, has already said that the city’s public swimming pools will not open this summer, even as its playgrounds remain shut for the time being.

“You can’t tell people in a dense urban environment all through the summer months, ‘We don’t have anything for you to do,’” Mr. Cuomo said, adding, “There’s a sanity equation here.”

Earlier on Sunday, Mr. de Blasio had struck a similar chord while announcing a series of advisory groups to help imagine New York City’s future, with an emphasis on a rebuild that “confronts deep inequities” in low-income and minority communities, a theme Mr. Cuomo also touched on.

“We’re going to come back stronger and fairer,” the mayor said, promising to “learn the powerful lessons of this horrible tragedy.” He added: “We’re not going to allow the disparities that we’ve seen to exist in the future.”

While large gatherings seem unlikely to occur anywhere in New York anytime soon, the governor also floated the concept that professional sports leagues could play some games without crowds, saying he had discussed the idea with several team owners so people had something to watch on television.

In laying out scenarios for a broader reopening of other businesses, Mr. Cuomo suggested that data would be evaluated in two-week increments, and that companies wanting to restart work would be individually evaluated to determine “how essential a service does that business provide and how risky is that business.”

He also laid a heavy onus on businesses to develop their own plans for reopening, including outfitting employees with personal protective equipment, enforcing social distancing between employees and customers and instituting testing in the workplace.

“They have to think about how they are going to reopen with this quote-unquote new normal,” Mr. Cuomo said, adding, “It’s very much going to be up to businesses.”

The governor cautioned again and again that the state was a long way from a full recovery, warning against a possible second-wave of the virus and noting on Sunday that 367 people had been killed by the virus in the last 24 hours, bringing the death toll to 16,966 people in the state. And that number does not include some 5,200 probable deaths that New York City health officials have been tallying.

Indeed, while Mr. Cuomo’s comments offered hope for some upstate regions, the outlook for the New York City area seemed much more perilous, with countless calculations and safeguards being considered. Retail, tourism and hospitality industries — the bedrock of the city’s economy — would be difficult to restart quickly and without great care, the governor said, as would transportation and schools, which he has said he wants coordinated with neighboring New Jersey and Connecticut.

Heather C. Briccetti, the president of the Business Council of New York State, praised Sunday’s decision, and concurred with Mr. Cuomo that entertainment and retail would be more complicated to reopen, because of the tendency of those sectors to draw crowds. “That’s not going to happen with construction and manufacturing,” she said.

That sentiment was echoed by Gary LaBarbera, the president of the 100,000-member Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York. “It makes perfect sense for the construction industry to be at the front end of the remobilization of the work force,” he said in a statement.

While the news was largely positive on Sunday — with marked decreases in hospitalizations and other critical indicators of the crisis — Mr. Cuomo said that such progress could be lost in “a matter of days if we’re not careful.”

“Anybody who sits up here and says, ‘Well I’m going to tell you what is going happen a month down the road,’” he said, “I wouldn’t believe that person.”

Thomas Kaplan contributed reporting from Washington and Luis Ferré-Sadurní contributed reporting from New York.